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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER PRESENTS A DISCUSSION OF ENCOUNTER GROUPS, THEIR PLACE IN PSYCHOLOGY TODAY, THEIR LIMITATIONS AND VALUES. THE PURPOSE OF ENCOUNTER GROUPS IS ALWAYS ONE OF FACILITATING THE GROWTH OF THE PERSON, AND OF TEACHING INDIVIDUALS HOW TO COMMUNICATE MORE EFFECTIVELY WITH EACH OTHER. ENCOUNTER GROUPS ARE PARTICULARLY APPROPRIATE FOR THE PERSON WHO EXPERIENCES A "LOSS OF FAMILY", WHO IS LONELY OFTEN AND SAD IN HIS BEING IN SOCIETY. THE ENCOUNTER GROUP REPRESENTS A SUBSTITUTE FAMILY, A SAFE PLACE TO EXPERIMENT WITH NEW BEHAVIORS. HOWEVER, IT IS ONLY A SUBSTITUTE FAMILY, IT DOES HAVE LIMITATIONS. IT IS FOR THOSE WHO ARE FOR THE MOST PART FREE OF PROFOUND AND CHRONIC PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES. A PARTICIPANT COMES TO GROW, AS A PERSON, NOT AS A PATIENT. THE IDEAL SITUATION OF ENCOUNTER IS ONE OF SHARING AND COMMUNICATING IN A SITUATION OF SAFETY. THE TRAINED ENCOUNTER LEADER ALWAYS MAKES CERTAIN THAT EACH PERSON'S INTEGRITY AND HIS READINESS FOR INSIGHT IS PROTECTED. THE CHANGES IN PEOPLE FOLLOWING AN ENCOUNTER EXPERIENCE ARE AN INCREASED SENSITIVITY AND AWARENESS OF SELF, AND A CONCOMITANT INCREASE AWARENESS IN OTHERS AND THEIR SENSITIVITIES. (KJ)

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CHANNEL OF COMMUNICATION: ENCOUNTER GROUPS*

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Introduction

What is encounter? Very briefly, it is the process and the event which occurs when a group of persons meet together to explore with each other their common humanity, their essential similarities and their essential differences, and to lend support to each other as each person determines for himself his own direction of growth and commitment to the larger society in which he has his being (his family, his peer group, his world).

The encounter approach has proved useful so far in many situations. In recent years, for example, the encounter method has been used as an educational and counseling method with students, with drug addicts, as a training method in the helping professions, with persons considered as hard-core unemployable, and with business and government officials. If present trends in the utilization of the encounter approach continue, there will undoubtedly come to light still further applications for its approach.

As an educational method, there is no rigid structural form to the encounter process. It is organized always according to the situational needs of the group members. In the educational system encounter courses can take place on a twice-a-week basis. With marriage renewal groups for couples it may be organized on a once-a-

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week evening get-together. In a workshop in race relations the group may meet for one to several weeks. In industrial relationships the most economical organization of time may be an encounter marathon that runs over a weekend. How the group is organized is determined by what the group wants to accomplish, the style the encounter leader favors, and the economics and the time available.

But the purpose of encounter groups is always one of facilitating the growth of the person, and of teaching individuals how to communicate more effectively with each other.

Encounter and the present psychosocial milieu:

Anxiety and alienation are said to be the particular symptoms of our time. This is not an individual event alone, since it is beginning to be an experience shared by many persons in society, even in some measure by the larger society as well. We have been called an anxious people, an alienated people, and the events in our present society seem to confirm that diagnosis.

There is little to be gained in attempting to deny or to confirm the truth of that diagnosis. What matters in the individual life and in the continuing growth of society, is the recognition that we, in the mid-twentieth century, are in difficulty. And that the difficulty is becoming now a group phenomenon rather than something that is confined to an isolated group of individuals.

Other analysts of the social scene have diagnosed our difficulty in terms of its ideological, political, and economic factors. I do not want, in any way, to deny the validity of these insights, nor of the prescriptions suggested to remedy our situation. All of these

prescriptions have a piece of the truth; and our situation is already so difficult and so complex that any prescription which offers a solution--even a partial one--deserves attention.

In the narrower focus in which I live and work--the concern for individual persons and small groups--the prevailing factor that arises again and again for me is the sadness and the loneliness of the individual who experiences himself as lacking a family. And when I say the individual who lacks a family, I refer not only to the person who has actually experienced physical loss through death, divorce, or separation; but also the person who may live under the same roof with his family, yet who experiences himself as alone, alienated from others in the family--a being apart and isolated from others.

In some instances, this personal sense of loss may be shared in some measure by all the members of a family. Yet the fact that all members of a family share in a common sense of alienation and loss may not give them, even then, a commonality, a sense of being a family. For even if they recognize their alienation from each other, they may not know how to speak of it to each other.

This insight regarding the sad and lonely person is not a recent insight, but something that has borne in on me with increasing frequency over the years as I have worked with many persons to resolve this experienced sense of loss, and to integrate it into their present sense of self. Although I do not offer this insight as the prescription for what is the matter with our modern society, I do see it as one of society's symptoms: <u>The person who experiences a "loss of family" is the person who is lonely often and sad in his being in society</u>.

The "loss of family" is seen in many aspects of contemporary living, but particularly in the fact we seem so often out of touch with what is familiar. We seem, that is to say, often estranged (strangers) from ourselves, from one another, and from the larger society in which we live.

There can be a poignant outcome to the loss of the feeling of family for some persons in our society, since it can lead to a continuing estrangement of the person not only from himself, but in time also from the larger society in which he has his being. He experiences himself then as bereft, uprooted--as The Single One of Kierkegaard(4); or as The Underground Man of Dostoievsky(3); that is to say the experience of being homeless: a wanderer on the face of the earth who lacks a welcoming place to lay his head.

What has perhaps happened in our time is that the nuclear family, in its state of transition, is often no longer that safe and familiar place in which the child may evolve in safety those behaviors and ritual understandings he will need if he is to adapt himself creatively to society in our time of rapid technological advance.

Those advances come now, moreover, so quickly, one upon the other, that the individual person--even where he is secure in himself--is often hard put to keep up with the times. More often than not he can find his repertory of learned attitudes and behaviors becoming outmoded not just in the space of a generation, or even in a decade, but in a year, a month.....

But where he is out of step, unable to keep up with the changes in values of modern times, the person is then thrown back on himself.

And that "self", I submit, is all too often at its base just those conflicts and difficulties in which the nuclear family now can have its being: that is to say the breakdown in long-held values, the experience of estrangement, despair on occasion, feelings of worthlessness and nothingness, fear of intimacy, and, above all, a feeling of non-participation in one's own life and path. It is <u>against</u> and <u>in</u> that social and psychological milieu, I believe, the encounter group and the encounter approach now arises.

<u>Limitations of the encounter approach</u>:

Does that mean that encounter groups can replace the nuclear family in our time? An encounter group can never replace the nuclear family situation, in my opinion, and because of necessity the encounter group lacks that sense of responsibility and mutual obligation for its members which the real family (no matter how imperfect) always intends. The encounter group can attempt to provide a "substitute family situation" for a time. It can provide a safe place where the person may discuss and resolve his <u>unfinished</u> situations in his present living. It can enable him to <u>finish</u> and resolve his left-over difficulties of the past, and thereby enable him to move on in his growing[(7)]. But the encounter group is always merely a substitute situation only--and because it can avoid those enduring responsibilities and obligations of the real family.

Even as a substitute for the real family, which each man needs if he is to know himself as a person, the encounter group can still be a responsible place of safety wherein an individual may reach out to others, and be reached by them in a loving and sharing fashion. That is if the encounter group knows its limitations.

When an encounter group rests itself in its limitations it becomes then a <u>situation of safety</u> wherein persons may experiment with new behaviors(7): a place, namely, where the individual person can learn new ways of being with himself and with others; where a group can work cooperatively to reach those levels of the self wherein alienation and estrangement are met and dissolved so the "new" understanding of the self can be born. An encounter group can accomplish that goal, and it often may do so when the group stays within the limitations of the encounter approach.

One of the limitations of the encounter group method is that it is suitable primarily for those who are for the most part free of profound and chronic psychological difficulties. A person comes to an encounter group in most instances for the <u>growth</u> experience. And it is for that reason he comes as <u>a person to be facilitated in his growth</u> rather than as a <u>patient</u>, someone, that is to say, who is in need of <u>psychotherapy</u>.

There are several important technical-theoretical differences and similarities between psychotherapy and the encounter approach that I cannot now discuss. So let me say simply this: if the encounter group is "managed" correctly, namely, remains within the limitations of its method, each person in the group is provided eventually with the opportunity to participate in the group process, and thus may share (insofar as he can) in the growth and evolution of the group. In that individual participation each person then can perhaps make a step forward in his own development, and he can contribute also in some measure to the growing of others in the group.

That is the ideal situation of encounter, one of sharing and communicating in a situation of safety. And the well-run encounter meeting often attains just that ideal of mutual and individual growth as it works toward furthering the experience of group community.

The shared experience of <u>communion</u> and <u>community</u> is a potent factor in deepening the group experience. And it can be, moreover, a vital agent in healing the sense of individual alienation and non-participation--an insight for which I remain continually in debt to Martin Buber(1). For <u>community</u> is the ultimate situation of interpersonal safety, the situation wherein communication with oneself and others is at last facilitated; and where those essential changes in the person may take place. That event does not happen every time, in every group. But I look to it, wait for it, work toward it, and rest myself always there once it finally arises.

The experience of community, communion, is that ever-livening experience of being at home, of experiencing a home-place (<u>heimat</u>) in which the individual knows himself to be related to other persons; at one with them for the now; and thus enabled in his own being to share himself with others insofar as it is appropriate.

I mention the matter of appropriateness, though I am not able to discuss it at any length now. There are no inappropriate thoughts and feelings, in my view--there are simply these thoughts and these feelings. How we choose to express these thoughts and feelings--and when--is where the matter of appropriateness arises. We live at the present time in a period of rapid change in values and attitudes. And behaviors thought inappropriate once upon a time are now often perceived more calmly, with less fear, even with

equanimity. My own position here is essentially conservative. And, for that reason, "doing my own thing" is always for me a qualified freedom. "Doing my own thing" insofar as it pertains to thinking my own thoughts and experiencing my own feelings can be an absolute freedom. How and when I express these feelings and thoughts is, however, qualified by my respect for myself, and for those other persons who now cross my path and share my world. Change in myself, and growth in myself and other persons entails therefore, for me, the matter of appropriateness. To that extent I am a conservative encounter leader, even one who is a bit "up-tight" in his leading a group. I make no apologies for this, I simply say that it is so.

Related to the matter of appropriateness of behavior is an equally important consideration of the training of persons who lead encounter groups. Here also I am again a conservative.

In my view, the encounter group can be a situation of safety and growth so long as the encounter leader knows and remembers the limits of the encounter method; and, more important, knows and never forgets the capacity of each person in the group to profit and grow from his present group experience. There are always individual capacities and readiness for growth. And since growing can often mean--may even demand--confrontation with aspects of the self the person may not be able to integrate into his growing at the present time, the trained encounter leader makes certain always that each person's integrity and his readiness for insight is protected--that it remains always inviolate.

I speak now, specifically, of the so-called brainwashing situation that can occur in a group that has discarded its concern for appropriate behavior; and of the kind of tyranny that can come to pass when a group sets out, for example, to force an individual person to see some aspect of himself he is not yet ready to acknowledge and integrate into his growing. Another example of the same brainwashing approach is where the group attempts to force a person to conform to a presently evolving group norm. Both of these examples are brainwashing situations, I believe; and both events, to my way of seeing, are situations of "group-think", as they are also de-humanizing, and inevitably situations of non-growth.

I believe the trained encounter leader never allows such situations of non-growth to happen. He senses, and supports, and protects what each person in the group can manage safely at any one time, as he also protects the right always of each person to grow at his own pace, and according to his own rhythm.

Failing that right, that assurance, and that protection, a person can never be certain if an encounter group will be a growth experience for him, or if it will result in the particular kind of hell that follows when an essential and authentic aspect of the self is placed in jeopardy. I know of such experiences happening to persons, and they are, in my view, inexcusable.

I spoke of the trained encounter leader as never allowing such situations of non-growth to take place. Trained, in the sense I now use the word, has nothing as such to do with degrees from universities, nor with taking courses--although schooling and courses can indeed help to prepare the encounter leader for this

approach, to practice this method. But what the trained encounter leader does need is the kind of acute understanding and appreciation for what each person can now confront in himself; how the person can manage to integrate these present experiences and still make the step forward that is growth. The essential consideration in training is therefore the encounter leader's own level of growth; his understanding and appreciation of group and individual dynamics; and, above all, his dedication and caring for the value and integrity of each person who crosses his path.

Change, growth, often demands anxiety and suffering on the part of the person who is doing the growing and changing. For that reason, it seems to me, only the person himself has the right to say when he is ready to make the step forward, to begin the encounter that changes himself. That is his right, his option, never ours. It is never mine.

Encounter and change in persons:

The changes in behavior that are often mentioned as following the encounter experience can be subsumed under two rubrics: an increase in sensitivity and awareness of the self; and a concommitant increase in awareness of others and their sensitivities.

In specific terms these changes include, briefly, some of the following. First, an increase in the person's awareness of how others are feeling, and more sensitivity also to how the person experiences himself. In simple terms, because he is less tense, more aware, he is enabled to feel more.

Second, there seems to be a change in the modality of sight and seeing. The person reports, for example, being more "clear-sighted", more able to have "insight" into the motivations of himself and other persons. To that extent he seems more able to allow the world to be itself, including those persons with whom he lives--he seems able to accept himself and others more easily.

A person can report, third, a change in his sense of touch. He seems less "touchy" to himself and others, yet he appears more able, at the same time, to allow closer contact and intimacy in a way he could not have managed previously. The result of this sensory change is more often than not reported as being able to "feel close" to someone else, and "to allow the closeness to happen". As a result he experiences himself as less distant in relationships, more able to involve himself in what is happening.

Change in the fourth sense, hearing, is reported as the willingness and ability to listen to others, and to oneself; to be able to hear what is being said with less effort, and of being able to respond in return. (Change here can have some interesting implications in the further growth of the person when we consider how he may have been "deafened" by his previous training in society; not to mention the continuing bombardment of the senses in our era of mass communication!)

The change in the sense of taste seems to entail, in brief, the matter of what the person can assimilate to himself and still remain a growing, healthy organism. Here are reported, for example, growth in self-understanding, the willingness to stand-up for what

one really believes, and decreases in the fears of being different, etc.: that is to say, change in those orienting considerations of the organism which involve the matter of emancipation.

As to changes in the intuitive faculty--the ability to discern concretely and accurately what the present situation intends--I can say less of that aspect of growth. It seems to be the case that the person "has it", or he does not. Thus, for example, when a person is already intuitive to some extent, there does seem indeed to be a deepening of the person's ability to perceive the many levels of human communication--granted his other sensory modalities are re-sensitized.

We are, all of us, today to some extent deafened and deadened by environments that press in on us. In the dialogical encounter of the loving communication which, following Martin Buber[(2)], I call communion and community, the organism is no longer overwhelmed by stimulation (that is to say pushed and forced to be other than it is here-and-now). For in the meeting of dialogue it is appreciated rather in just its present difficulties with contact and awareness: those difficulties, namely, which make for stereotyped behaviors. Instead of being reproached for his present inability to permit the moment of contact and awareness (namely forced to grow and change), the person is gradually, bit by bit, enabled to know his deadness, his lacks in sensitivity--to know himself there, and thereby to prepare the way for the coming moment of living contact and change.

Many terms have been used to describe the experience of re-sensitization to the self and the feelings of joy that accompany it. To me it seems mostly the moment of integration: the moment when

our senses are acutely aware, attuned to what is there rather than to what we think or imagine is there. It is the experience of at-one-ment, of at-one-ness, with the world, and of our being, as we perceive it.

Once the person begins to dissolve his de-sensitizations in the moments of encounter, he comes then in more direct correspondence with his body, and therefore more in tune with his bodily truth--its lawfulness, its validity, its continued orienting of himself toward paths that are natural and human. In that way he begins to see more clearly and steadily, to be a better judge of what is fake and what is genuine. So also he begins to experience more deeply what is there. And to give himself, or withhold himself, according to the authentic demands of the moment. As he can give himself more deeply and honestly to another person, so also he is enabled to give himself in depth to a career, a vocation, or to a task of the moment--and because he is in touch with his being, his centering motivations and truth.

When he is in touch there, with his centering motivations and truth, he becomes then his own person: what has been called a self-actualizing person[6], a fully-functioning person[8], or a beautiful person[5].

In my view, all of these metaphors include the necessity, and the capacity, and the willingness to love--to be a neighbor, a brother and sister to those who cross one's path and destiny. Why so? Because one's own truth and one's own realization stands out always in company with others, and is validated ultimately in the communion with others.

No matter how we may choose to formulate the end-goal and ethic of encounter and growth--whether as self-actualization, or the fully-functioning person, or the beautiful person, etc.--the encounter approach, as a dialogical process, seems to me always at base a radical event in purpose and in intent. It is radical in the sense of endeavoring to get to the root (radex) of the person's present difficulty in living; in its letting-be of the other (not forcing him to be other than he is here-and-now); yet in its willingness also to struggle with the other person insofar as he is presently blinded, or deafened, or in other ways desensitized, and thus unaware of his true state of being as a human person.

Yet none of the necessary changing and growth can come to pass for the person—even in truth begin--unless there is also the caring for him: our willingness, namely, to wait with him and to care for him as he struggles to know himself as this blinded and deafened, and therefore fearful and lonely, individual.

It is in the meeting with what is deafened, and blinded, and alienated in the individual that encounter is prepared, the step forward of growth begun, and the person's present difficulty can be acknowledged, met, loved, and thereby transcended.

Martin Buber says an individual becomes a person in dialogue, and in the meeting of dialogue only. I agree with Buber because it seems to me that Buber has demonstrated in his philosophy and in his own life an enduring truth--that it takes a person to enable an individual to know himself as person.

As individuals we remain isolated and estranged from community, and thus from knowing our essential self in the family of man.

Our essential self is always personal, yet also a shared knowing, and a familial truth rather than the matter of individuality alone. To know myself as person is to know myself with you, or, in the older phrasing, with Thou: that is to say no longer an individual, no longer alone, but in communication with you, and with those other persons who cross my path, and share my existence in the world. I am therefore irrevocably involved with you, whether I choose to acknowledge this truth, or to deny it--and even as I am responsible to myself, and alive, and growing.

The encounter approach is one way of facilitating that understanding, of communicating that event. This truth, that event, is so simple, yet we seem to be losing touch with it in the pressures of our industrial age. This may well be a reason the encounter group method has evolved; and that we turn now to encounter groups as a way of facilitating communication among men--between my neighbor and myself, between you and me and our neighbors.

When John, the Evangelist, was an old man, now ready to die, his disciples came to ask for his final teaching before he crossed over the bridge. He is said to have replied, "Love one another". It is reported that John's disciples were surprised, even put-off by this final word: they looked for something more earthshaking than John had taught them while he lived. It is reported that they buried John, and that they then went away and thought upon what he had said. Encounter is sometimes like that, also simply this....

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